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Life is a Carnival: Existential Themes in Music

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PROJECT TITLE: Life is a Carnival: Existential Themes
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Life is a Carnival: Existential Themes in Music

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Senior Honors Project

April 24, 2000

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Life is a Carnival: Existential Themes in Music

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of existential themes in music. The major themes found and discussed are as follows:

- 1) Humans are alone in an indifferent universe
- 2) Existence is essentially absurd
- 3) Freedom, choice, and responsibility
- 4) Creating meaning

These themes were found in countless songs, and thirty-seven songs were chosen to discuss.

These songs come primarily from rock music from 1962-present. This paper discusses how the above themes are conveyed in vocals, music, and especially lyrics. I have also included a sample of my poems that contain existential themes.

Life is a Carnival: Existential Themes in Music

The term existentialism encompasses a wide variety of ideas and themes, some of which even contradict each other. It is difficult to define the term because it is so broad and includes philosophers from different time periods and with differing messages. Opinions differ on what ideas are existential and what philosophers are existentialists. For example, Heidegger, who is “generally regarded as the central figure in the development of twentieth-century existentialist thought...rejected being classified as an existentialist” (Perry). This makes it difficult to accurately sum up what existentialism is. Nevertheless, there are several themes that are common to enough existential philosophers that they may loosely be called “existential themes.” These include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. We are alone. Every person lives in his or her own world of meaning and understanding, and we never really experience the same world as anyone else. Also, the universe is unfeeling and indifferent to our individual plights as humans. The only authentic reality is in the mind of the individual; it is not shared, and each of us is essentially alone.
2. Existence is essentially absurd. There is no concrete purpose of the human condition. There are no absolute truths and no guides for how one should think, act, or live.
3. We are free and are responsible for our lives. Because there are no absolute truths, there is no limit to what we can do. There is nothing controlling us, so the responsibility for deciding how to live falls entirely upon the individual. We must

look within ourselves and choose how to live. This means refusing to blindly accept the path others have laid out for us and instead choosing our own path.

4. There is no inherent meaning in any aspect of existence. Part of being responsible for our lives means creating meaning for ourselves. We are given nothing but existence and we must assign meaning to things and decide what is valuable on an individual basis.

While this list is not exhaustive, this paper will concern these themes and their manifestations in poetry and song. These themes are prevalent in all aspects of American culture today and appear in literature, music, art, film, etc.. Perhaps the most obvious and interesting appearances of these existential themes is in rock and pop music. From hippies to folk singers to alternative rockers and everywhere in between, people seem to feel that they are alone in an absurd life and it is up to them to make sense of it all; and they express these feelings in their music. This paper will explore variations of the above themes and how these themes are expressed in song lyrics.

We Are Alone

Jose Ortega y Gasset explains the concept of “radical solitude” as the idea that every person is living in a private world of understanding and experience that is never completely shared with anyone else. Ortega says that his experiences, “my being who I am, and this being my world, and my living in it—all these are things that happen to me and solely to me, or to me in my radical solitude.” He goes on to say that if I observe other people, I see them as “other ‘human lives,’ each with its own world, which as such does not communicate with mine” (94). No only are other people unsympathetic to our

personal experiences, but so is the whole universe. We are in an unfeeling world where the only sympathetic understanding we get comes from ourselves.

This theme of solitude and existential loneliness is prevalent in The Band's "In a Station." Richard Manuel paints a picture of being in a station, hearing children laughing outside and feeling isolated. He asks, "Wonder, could you ever know me/Know the reason why I live." (The Band 5 - 6). These lines are a key example of an expression of Ortega's idea of radical solitude. The person he addresses does not understand him, and he feels disconnected both from her/him and from the children outside. Manuel then paints another picture of being on a mountain top with a person, presumably a lover, and says, "Isn't everybody dreaming!/Then the voice I hear is real" (13 - 14) suggesting that this painting is a dream he has not attained. The next lines ask, "Out of all the idle scheming/Can't we have something to feel?" (15 - 16). In addition to the loneliness he feels, there is also a sense of emptiness and lack of emotion. While Manuel's voice is strained and full of emotion, he sings in a way that, combined with the slow, dreamy music, creates a peaceful, sad-but-accepting attitude toward the situations of which he sings.

Similar sentiments are conveyed with a quite different attitude in Wilco's "Sunken Treasure." The title seems to be referring to his heart, when, at the beginning of the song, he says, "There is no sunken treasure/Rumored to be/Wrapped inside my ribs/In a sea black with ink" But the song also hints that he is looking for something (inside or outside himself) that isn't there. Whether the treasure is his heart or something else, the song conveys the feeling that the singer is unsatisfied, incomplete and alone. Jeff

Tweedy wails out the refrain, "I am so out of tune with you" giving a hopeless, desperate feel to the words. He's not as accepting of his isolation and disconnection as Manuel is.

The Smashing Pumpkins have quite a knack for expressing their dissatisfaction with feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Their song, "Thirty-Three" is a plea to an unknown someone for love that will "last forever" (The Smashing Pumpkins 14). There is a sense of hope in the song, and he seems to believe in the person he sings to. He also draws some support from other people, suggested by the line, "But in all the same old haunts I still find my friends." (19). However, there is a strong sense of isolation and being in an unfeeling world, especially in the lines, "So I pull my collar up and face the cold, on my own/The earth laughs beneath my heavy feet/At the blasphemy in my old jangly walk." (7 - 9). He clings to the hope that this person will "make it last, forever," (25) but in the meantime he is alone.

The Pumpkins do it again in another song off their latest album *Machina*. This song, "I of the Mourning," retells the same scenario of the lonely person on empty streets. He perhaps expresses his loneliness best in the heart-wrenching line, "No one's out there to hear if I care/About the troubles in the air." In this song he is reliving old memories, trying to "bring the past alive," but then he says he's going "home to die on my own." In these two songs, Billy Corgan and the Smashing Pumpkins exemplify existential loneliness by exposing characters who are completely alone inside their own heads with little or no real support from outside.

The Beatles put similar sentiments into a more upbeat song, "Good Morning, Good Morning," which is less hopeless and depressing, and more matter-of-fact. The song describes the beginning of a working day for someone who feels alienated from—

presumably his—own life. The song gives the feel of an unsympathetic universe by describing the town this person is in as “like a ruin” (The Beatles, “Good Morning” 9) with “everyone half asleep/And you’re on your own you’re in the street.” (10 - 11). However, John Lennon does not sound remotely as desperate and lonely as Corgan. He cheerfully rattles off the lyrics in a sing-song way to a bouncy guitar melody and weird animal noises (rumored to be a reference to The Beach Boys’ album *Pet Sounds*). The weird cheerfulness of this depressing song makes it seem almost more disconnected than any of the above songs. It’s almost as if the singer doesn’t even expect the listener to understand him, which in a way makes it a superior example of a portrayal of existential loneliness.

Another example of this theme portrayed in an upbeat song is Simon and Garfunkel's "I Am A Rock." This is the cry of a lonely person who has been hurt by someone ["If I never loved, I never would have cried." (Simon and Garfunkel 17)], and has isolated himself. This isolation seems intentional, and the singer sounds proud and defiant, but he refers to being hurt and admits, "I am shielded in my armor,/Hiding in my room, safe within my womb." (21 - 22), suggesting that he is scared and weak. He compares himself to a rock and to an island and says, "And the rock feels no pain;/And an island never cries." (25 - 26). This person is scared and lonely because he has received no support from the outside world, so he has withdrawn into his own existence alone.

Existence is Absurd

While some existentialists are Christians, Jews, or members of other religious faiths, others, such as Jean-Paul Sartre are atheists. Sartre says, “the existentialist... finds it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it” (Sartre 22). Some existentialists may disagree with this idea, and others reconcile the idea of no *a priori* values with the existence of a higher power. But in general, existentialism is permeated by the idea that existence is absurd. There are no absolute truths, no fundamental definitions of right and wrong, no purpose of existence, human or otherwise. Nietzsche echoes Sartre’s statement with his famous slogan: “God is dead.” While he has different views on why God is dead and how people have killed God, the existing result is the same: there is no one to tell us what is meaningful and what is right and good. “Man must live,” he said, “without any religious or metaphysical consolations” (Barrett 185).

Bob Dylan is a born-again Christian, but his early writing shows that he understood that existence is absurd. “Blowin’ in the Wind” speaks of war, death, and suffering, and asks what it will take for people to notice these things and do something about it. “Bob Dylan’s Dream” paints a scene where he and his friends are sitting around enjoying themselves and not worrying about the future. “We thought we could sit forever in fun/ But our chances really was a million to one.” (Dylan, “Dream” 15 - 16). In this dream, it was “easy to tell wrong from right” and they didn’t have big decisions to make. He ends the dream saying “I’d give it all gladly if our lives could be like that.” (28). In this song, Dylan is saying that it’s never easy to tell wrong from right and that

life is full of unguided choices and that there is no clear path to take and no clear purpose to life. There are also suggestions of life's absurdity in Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" including the sense of confusion and the confession that he doesn't "know what any of this is worth." (Dylan, "Watchtower" 4).

Dylan's major expressions of life's absurdity are his anti-war protest songs. War is an obvious example of the absurdity of existence, and several parts of existentialism have been a response to the muddled meanings of war. In his bitter and ironic "With God on Our Side," his primary message is that no group of people can say that their beliefs are fundamentally correct and worth waging war over. He goes through a brief history of America's wars and speaks of the glorification of America's causes. He admits "The reason for fighting/ I never got straight/ But I learned to accept it/ Accept it with pride/ For you don't count the dead/ When God's on your side." (Dylan, "With God" 27 - 32). He speaks of his confusion at trying to understand the meaning behind war and his resentment for people who believe that God supports them in their killing. He finishes saying "If God's on our side/ He'll stop the next war" (71 - 72). Dylan is famous for his protest songs, most of which convey his sentiment that war and killing are absurd.

This sentiment was common in the sixties due to the war in Vietnam, which ignited Dylan's protest. Perhaps the most notable Vietnam war protest song is Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth." This song echoes Dylan, saying that what's going on "ain't exactly clear," (Buffalo Springfield 2) and that "nobody's right if everybody's wrong." (8). The war doesn't make any sense to them and creates feelings of meaninglessness and confusion. The meaninglessness of war is a key example of life's absurdity.

Other sentiments included in this theme are the feelings of looking for something that isn't there, trying to fit into a place that doesn't exist, and feeling emptiness and dissatisfaction with one's current life situation. U2 has perhaps the definitive example of a portrayal of these emotions in their, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." This song exudes dissatisfaction. Bono passionately lists the places he's been and the things he's done, and maintains the title sentiment. The song is sung to an unknown someone, and he says he's done all these things, "Only to be with you." (U2 3) Some lines, such as, "I have kissed honey lips/Felt the healing in her fingertips" (12 - 13), suggest that this someone is a lover, while the lines, "I believe in the Kingdom Come" (24), and other religious references suggest that he is speaking to God. On their album *Rattle and Hum*, the band remade the song with a gospel chorus and added a new verse to make it sound more religious. Regardless of who the singer addresses, the point of the song is that the singer has not found what he wants and is dissatisfied with his current situation. His life, as it is, is essentially meaningless to him.

Another example of a dissatisfied soul is Simon and Garfunkel's "Richard Cory," adapted from E. A. Robinson's poem. This song is about a wealthy, popular man, and is told from the perspective of a poor worker in one of Cory's factories. The worker describes the extravagant lifestyle and the noble generosity of Cory and says "Oh, I wish that I could be Richard Cory." (Simon and Garfunkel 10). The meaning of the entire song changes entirely and comes to its fruition with the last line about the worker reading the headlines that said, "Richard Cory went home last night and put a bullet through his head." (23). This idea of a supposedly happy man ending his life is filled with absurdity.

Richard Cory was dissatisfied with his life which was obviously meaningless and empty to him.

Feelings of absurdity and emptiness are prevalent in the Counting Crows' "Round Here," another dreamlike, pensive piece. Adam Duritz begins by poetically expressing his feelings of invisibility with the quietly sung "Step out the front door like a ghost/into the fog where no one notices/the contrast of white on white." (Counting Crows 1 - 3). He mentions walking in the rain, being lost in thought and asks the question with double meaning, "Where? I don't know." (9). He can't seem to figure anything out as he mentions the "crumbling difference between wrong and right" (6), and then he introduces Maria, a character as confused and dissatisfied as he is. Maria is confused about sex and religion and feels "she's more than just a little misunderstood." (23). Both he and Maria feel lost and confused in a muddled absurd reality. Their confusion is not resolved, and the song ends with Duritz's desperate cries that he "can't see nothin'" and that he's "under the gun 'round here." The song is a cry of young people trying to figure out their lives and find meaning in an absurd reality.

A similar cry is found in the much more angry sounds of the Seattle grunge band, Nirvana. In their "Smells Like Teen Spirit" the targeted people are younger than the twenty-something audience of the Counting Crows, but the message is similar. The teen anthem begins with the lines, "Load up on guns and bring your friends/It's fun to lose and to pretend." (Nirvana 1 - 2). Both the lyrics and the music, including screeching guitar and Kurt Cobain's rough screams make the song sound angry and give a feel of discontent. The video for the song (which is as important as the song itself) shows a gym full of angry kids bashing around to the band's discordant noise. While the reason for the

kids' anger isn't directly stated, it obviously has to do with searching for a place to fit and finding meaning where it doesn't seem to exist. These sentiments are evident in the vague lines, "And I forget just why I taste/Oh yeah, I guess it makes me smile/I found it hard, it was hard to find/Oh well, whatever, nevermind." (11 - 14). It seems as though the narrator is so disheartened with his situation that he won't even bother to finish talking about it.

The band conveys similar feelings in a slightly more eloquent song, "Lithium." Cobain begins with a sarcastic "I'm so happy" (Nirvana 1), saying that his only friends are in his head. He goes on to reject organized Christianity by saying "Sunday morning is everyday for all I care." (6). He conveys feelings of meaninglessness in the chorus by singing (or rather, screaming) no words, but simply "Hey hey hey" repeatedly. The next verse begins with "I'm so lonely because today I shaved my head/And I'm not sad." (10 - 11), suggesting that he is dissatisfied with the monotony of his life. By saying in the same sentence that he is lonely and not sad, and by screaming a wordless chorus, he seems to be saying that his emotions are confused and jumbled and he doesn't know what to feel. His youth is an important part of this confusion, and he is obviously discouraged by the slow realization that life is absurd.

A less discouraging and more peaceful expression of life's absurdity came decades before Nirvana with The Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever." John Lennon shows no bitterness or anger at the fact that "nothing is real" (The Beatles, "Strawberry" 2), though he does seem to be critical of people who don't acknowledge the absurdity of reality, evident in the lines, "Living is easy with eyes closed/Misunderstanding all you see." (4). He seems to be content when he says, "But you know I know when it's a

dream” (14), referring to Strawberry Fields, which is presumably a metaphor for life. He says that in this bizarre, meaningless life, “It’s getting hard to be someone/But it all works out/It doesn’t matter much to me.” (5). This surreal song with mystical lyrics and weird experimental sounds conveys life’s absurdity in a more gentle, accepting way.

We Are Alone and Existence is Absurd

The major themes discussed in this paper are obviously related. In some situations, a writer cannot express one theme without expressing another. The following songs have strong expressions of two of the major themes: we are alone in an unfeeling universe, and existence is absurd and essentially meaningless. A prime example of a fusion of these two themes again comes from the Beatles with “Eleanor Rigby,” a haunting song about lonely people living meaningless lives. McCartney’s sweet voice is full of anguish and despair and is accompanied by a string orchestra including frustrated violins and a melancholy cello. In 1966 this song pushed the limits of what could be defined as a rock song. The song first describes Eleanor Rigby, a woman who “lives in a dream” (The Beatles, “Eleanor” 3) and keeps up her looks as she keeps up her life. McCartney asks who she does this for. The next description is of Father MacKenzie, who writes sermons no one listens to and keeps his socks darned even though no one will see them. The song asks “What does he care?” (16) and then wonders where “all the lonely people” (9) belong. These people are living in their own worlds with no support from other people or the world. Not only do they fail to draw meaning from outside, but they also have no meaning inside themselves. The song creates a sense of absurdity and meaninglessness in the portrayal of these lives without purpose.

McCartney portrays a similar character in “The Fool on the Hill,” a man “nobody wants to know.” (The Beatles, “Fool” 3). This man is living alone, observing the “world spinning ‘round,” (9) and is totally disconnected from society. No one listens to him or likes him, and he doesn’t seem to care. He doesn’t do anything meaningful, so while his life is lonely, it is also lacking in purpose and meaning. In these ways this character exemplifies both existential loneliness and the absurdity of life.

Bob Dylan portrays another similar character in “Like a Rolling Stone.” This woman used to be a rich socialite but has since fallen from her aristocratic status. She is living alone on the streets and has presumably become a prostitute. Dylan asks her how it feels to be “without a home/Like a complete unknown/Like a rolling stone.” (Dylan, “Rolling Stone” 12 - 14). He calls her “Miss Lonely” and describes her wasted education at an expensive school. He seems to have little pity for her current situation because her past situation seemed so empty and worthless. She has now been turned out into the cold, unfeeling streets, and doesn’t have inside her what it takes to survive alone. He seems to condemn her and sings with a sort of serves-you-right attitude. Dylan switches perspectives in describing a similar character, this time speaking from the character’s point of view, in “I Am a Lonesome Hobo.” This is the story of a man, like the woman in the previous song, who once was “rather prosperous” (Dylan, “Hobo” 9) but failed to remain so. He says his fall came when he failed to trust his brother, and he advises his listeners not to do as he has done. He says his mistakes “led me to my fatal doom,/To wander off in shame,” (15 - 16) suggesting, again, a lonely, meaningless, absurd life.

Dylan conveys similar themes again in “Talking New York,” a telling of his trials in the city. He went there to try and get work but was not appreciated, so he left. He

describes the winter there, and says he would “Walk around with nowhere to go,/Somebody could freeze right to the bone/I froze right to the bone,” (Dylan, “Talking” 9 - 11) and he describes being shooed away from a coffee-house stage. Even after he landed a job in New York, he felt lonely and unappreciated. Assuming this song is autobiographical, this was a period in Dylan’s life where he was alone in an unsympathetic universe and doing nothing meaningful.

Perhaps the saddest example of a song that fuses these two themes is the Beach Boys’ “I Just Wasn’t Made For These Times.” Brian Wilson sings in a soft, sad voice, “I keep looking for a place to fit/Where I can speak my mind.” (The Beach Boys 1 - 2). The chorus consists of the background vocals crying, “Can’t find nothin’ I can put my heart and soul into” (13) in between the lead vocals confession, “Sometimes I feel very sad.” (11). This song is on *Pet Sounds*, an album written almost solely by Wilson during a time he felt lonely and isolated from his previous beach party music. Much of the album consists of feelings of isolation and alienation. Later in the song Wilson sings, “Every time I get the inspiration/To go change things around/No one wants to help me look for places/Where new things might be found.” (17 - 20). Wilson was tired of putting out music he felt was empty and meaningless, and felt alone in trying to create meaningful art. When he sings, “I guess I just wasn’t made for these times” (16), Wilson is conveying both existential isolation and a lack of meaning in his life.

Freedom, Choice, and Responsibility

Because existence is absurd and we experience our lives alone, it is up to each individual to decide for herself what her condition as a human being means, how she

wants to live her life, and what she wants to do to validate her life. It follows from the idea that existence is absurd that we are totally free to live how we want to live. The universe is void of *a priori* meaning, therefore, we can create and assign whatever meaning we want. The idea of creating meaning will be discussed later. However, because we are free to create meaning, we are also responsible for the meaning we create. We are responsible for how we understand and interpret the world, and we are responsible for our actions and responses to our environment. This means that rather than blindly accepting the values and established rules of society, we must evaluate them and decide for ourselves which ones we accept as individuals.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky discussed this notion in Notes from the Underground. This book discusses the individual's struggle to break away from the rules and norms of society and create his own. He challenges the individual to question even mathematical truths in the following passage: "Merciful Heavens! but what do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four? Of course I cannot break through the wall by battering my head against it if I really have not the strength to knock it down, but I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I have not the strength" (Dostoyevsky 8). He later refers to this pesky equation saying, "I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five is sometimes a very charming thing, too" (23). Dostoyevsky embraces the fact that we are free to believe whatever we choose.

Jean-Paul Sartre is slightly less enthusiastic about this fact. He says that man is "condemned to be free." "Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other

respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Sartre 23). He says that the individual is the author of every situation because s/he is responsible for his/her perception of and actions in every situation. Thus we will never be guided by an outside force, but can only rely on ourselves to make decisions. We are condemned because we can never escape this reality. In every situation we must always choose something, and “what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing” (41).

Soren Kierkegaard’s attitude toward the act of choosing is more like Dostoyevsky’s than like Sartre’s. He encourages the individual to think subjectively and decide what morals and values one has on one’s own. He outlines three levels on which people exist in relation to values—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The aesthetic person “lives solely in the pleasure or pain of the moment” and “chooses to live solely for such privileged and pleasurable moments” (Barrett 163). The ethical person chooses to do good, but makes decisions about morality based on those society has set for everyone. “An ethical rule, he (Kierkegaard) says, expresses itself as a universal: all men under such-and-such circumstances ought to do such and such. But the religious personality may be called upon to do something that goes against the universal norm” (166). The religious person makes private decisions about morality and thus lives freely and authentically. These three philosophers describe what it means to live in a universe where we have total freedom and are responsible for choosing the paths we take on an individual basis.

This theme of individual choice is extremely common in popular music and has been for decades. The Beach Boys tackle this theme in “I Know There’s and

Answer,” again from their album *Pet Sounds*. The singer addresses people who are “uptight” and who “trip through their day” (Beach Boys 9), and says that he knows there’s a better way to live, but that he’s not sure what it is. The chorus states, “I know there’s an answer/I know now but I have to find it by myself” (5 - 6). He is not specific as to what he thinks these people are doing wrong, but he is clear about refusing to live as everyone else does, and about finding a better way to live on his own. He is resolving to take responsibility for his life.

Dylan advises a woman to take responsibility in “Down in the Flood.” He gives suggestions for what to do when the flood comes, saying, “Now, you can train on down/To Williams Point,/You can bust your feet,/You can rock this joint.” (Dylan, “Flood” 5 - 8). But he reminds her that in making this choice she will be leaving him behind because he has chosen to stay. He also reminds her that it is an individual choice by saying, “If you go down in the flood,/It’s gonna be your own fault.” (18 - 19).

It is the singer that will do the leaving in Dylan’s “Farewell.” He is leaving his lover, who he speaks highly of, calling her, “my own true love” (Dylan, “Farewell” 5), and he is sad because she is “bound to stay behind” (9). This song also contains references to the theme of being alone in an unfeeling universe, saying, “Oh the weather is against me and the wind blows hard/And the rain she’s a-turnin’ into hail.” (10 - 11), and “I will travel unnoticed and unknown.” (31). He speaks of a town he has chosen to go, and though he never explains his reasons for leaving, he has made the choice and has left.

The choice of leaving is a particularly prevalent theme in popular music. The Cranberries address it in “I Still Do”, the testimony of a woman leaving her lover. She

says, "I don't want to leave you/Even though I have to." (Cranberries 5 - 6). By saying she "has to" leave she is not saying that she does not have a choice, she is saying that it is clear to her that this choice is the one she wants to make. She talks about going her own way and says that she cannot see into the future. Her existence does not have a purpose, but she is resolved to go out and create a purpose. She has some qualms about leaving, but her choice is solidified in the lines, "Need some time to find myself/I wanna live within." (9 - 10). She knows that she must make her own choices and wants to take time to figure things out on her own.

The Beatles tackle the theme of leaving in the wistfully sad, "She's Leaving Home," a song about a girl who has finally decided to break away from her parents and has claimed her freedom. The song says that she has been lonely and restricted, and by making this choice, she is free. It is sad because it is told from the point of view of the parents, and their feelings are conveyed through minor chords and through McCartney's shaky, emotion-filled voice. In another song, "Blackbird," the Beatles address a different, more universal freedom in a lighter, more positive way. McCartney advises the bird to "Take these broken wings and learn to fly" (Beatles, "Blackbird" 2), and reminds the bird in the middle of the song, "All your life/You were only waiting for this moment to be free." Perhaps the most loaded line of the song occurs at the end, when he encourages the bird to fly "Into the light of a dark black night." By the words "dark" and "black", the singer is referring to the unknown future and the uncertainty that comes with freedom. But he is optimistic in saying there is "light" there, suggesting that by breaking free into the unknown, one will find answers and personal truths. His advice to the bird

indicates that he would praise what Kierkegaard calls the religious person, the one who seeks answers and discovers morality alone on a personal level.

Another example of Kierkegaard's religious person is the speaker in R.E.M.'s "Walk Unafraid," a song off their latest album, *Up*. This song portrays an individual's struggle to break away from restrictions placed on him by other people. He says, "Everyone walks the same expecting me to step/The narrow path they've laid." (R.E.M. 9 - 10), and complains that people are telling him to "'keep within the boundaries if you want to play.'" (14). He expresses his frustration and desire to break away saying, "How can I be what I want to be?/When all I want to do is strip away these stilled constraints/And crush this charade/Shred this sad masquerade." (16 - 19). His criticism of the way others live and his refusal to conform is reminiscent of the Beach Boys' "I Know There's an Answer." The speakers in both songs admit they don't have all the answers, but they know what other people are doing is wrong. The speaker in "Walk Unafraid" says that others "claim to walk unafraid/I'll be clumsy instead" (11 - 12), meaning that his way won't be easy, but suggesting that it will be more honest. He follows these lines by saying he will "Hold my love me or leave me high" (13), in a defiant declaration of independence and disregard for the opinions of others.

Existence is Absurd and Freedom, Choice, and Responsibility

On the same album, *Up*, R.E.M. has a song that incorporates the ideas that existence is absurd and that we are responsible for our lives. This song, "Hope," is about a sick person, presumably dying, who is questioning his or her life and is looking for answers. This person is "questioning the sciences/And questioning religion" (R.E.M. 43

- 44), and is “looking for salvation” (49) and “looking for deliverance” (50). The sick person is in a dismal situation where everything seems hopeless and meaningless. S/he has lost faith in established norms, both making existence seem absurd and suggesting that s/he has begun to take responsibility and search for his/her own answers. In this way, the song conveys both of these major themes.

Another song that fuses these themes is Janis Joplin’s “Me and Bobby McGee.” This song, written by Chris Christopherson, is about a person’s longing for the past when she traveled with her lover, as they sang and enjoyed each other’s company. Joplin sings the words in her famous screeching, raspy voice, and puts so much emotion into them that the listener can almost picture being with Bobby and feel the longing she expresses. While the major theme of the song is not related to existential themes, there are two extremely powerful and wise lines that are. The chorus begins, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose/Nothing don’t mean nothing honey, if it ain’t free.” (Joplin 10 - 11). These lines suggest that the singer feels free and unattached with no limits and no underlying purpose. She is not clinging to anything meaningful and she is simply living freely. She champions this way of living by saying that things and ideas are meaningless if they are not free, that is, if they are put upon you by outside influences. In just these two lines, this song conveys the ideas of living in a universe with no *a priori* meaning and of being free and responsible for one’s own life.

George Harrison of the Beatles has written at least two songs that contain these two themes. His “Within You Without You,” on *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, is a spiritual song that shows his devotion to Eastern religion. Eastern influence is also found in the music, with the use of the sitar and other Eastern instruments. Like the

Beach Boys and R.E.M., he criticizes the way many people live, referring to people who, “hide themselves behind a wall of illusion/Never glimpse the truth—then it’s far too late—when they pass away.” (The Beatles, “Within You” 2 - 3). He reminds his listeners of their responsibility saying, “Try to realise it’s all within yourself no-one else can make you change/And to see you’re really only very small,/And life flows on within you and without you.” (7 - 9). These mystical lines convey the ideas that life is fluid and transient and mysterious, and that the way to live a good life is to look within and find your own answers.

Harrison conveys similar ideas on *The Beatles* (also known as *The White Album*), with “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.” This song is not as peaceful and mystical as the previous one, and instead has a more urgent, dark feel. He starts by describing existence around him in a manner reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea. He mentions the floor that needs sweeping and the fact that the earth is turning as if the two have the same significance to him. This creates a feeling of meaninglessness and absurdity. He goes on, in the middle of the song, to address an unknown person (or perhaps the general public) saying, “I don’t know how someone controlled you/They bought and sold you,” and is obviously disheartened that this person (or people) has been influenced by others and has not been living freely. He conveys his disappointment by repeating the line “While my guitar gently weeps” after every other line of the verses. This gives a sense of continuity to the situation he describes while it reveals his emotions. The line is supported throughout the song by a “weeping” guitar played by Eric Clapton. The sounds he produces add to the melancholy of the ideas of absurdity and lack of personal responsibility.

A much more cheerful observation of absurdity and freedom is found in The Band's "Life is a Carnival." The song begins by expressing the idea of freedom saying, "You can walk on the water, drown in the sand/You can fly off a mountaintop if anybody can." (The Band 1 - 2), and advises the listener to, "Run away, run away—it's the restless age/Look away, look away—you can turn the page." (3 - 4). These lines encourage one to take responsibility and make one's own choices. The song goes on to describe the carnival, complete with a house of mirrors, creating a chaotic, bizarre scene which is, as stated in the title, a simile for life. The use of organ and horns in the song adds to the cheerful, enthusiastic attitude toward this crazy life. The theme of the song seems to be that life is crazy and absurd, so one must jump in and figure it out for oneself. This song is unique in that it addresses these ideas in a pleasant, laid-back way.

Creating Meaning

Regarding freedom and responsibility, Sartre says, "No general ethics can show you what is to be done; there are no omens in the world" (Sartre 28). He says that the Catholics will argue that there are omens, and to this he would reply, "Granted—but, in any case, I myself choose the meaning they have" (28). In existentialism, a fundamental part of taking responsibility for one's life is creating meaning. This means interpreting one's surroundings, situations, and behaviors for oneself and deciding independently what attitudes one will have toward one's condition. We are thrown into this life and given no guides, except those offered by other people. While consideration of other people's guides, rules, and interpretations is wise, we must not rely solely on the opinions of others. Existence is fundamentally absurd and meaningless, and each person must look

within to create and assign meaning on an individual basis. In this way, one will live honestly and claim ownership for one's existence as a human being.

The idea that we are free to create meaning and interpret things on our own is one of the most refreshing and optimistic ideals of existentialism. Fleming and John's "Love Songs" contains this ideal. This is a sweet, hopeful confession of love, in which the singer is trying to create the kind of relationship she wants. She asks of her lover, "Sing me song without any words/I'll pretend you wrote it just for me/Paint me a picture with images blurred/So I can see what I want to see." (Fleming and John 1 - 4). In these lines, the singer readily admits that she is not looking for any concrete, preordained reality. She wants to be given a little something to interpret on her own and she wants to create what she wants out of what she is given. In this way, she understands that it is up to her to decide the meaning of this relationship to her, and she is willing to take responsibility and assign meaning to her lover's actions.

Joni Mitchell creates personal meaning in a more abstract way and in a variety of situations in "From Both Sides, Now." This song begins with a whimsical description of clouds using phrases such as "ice cream castles" (Mitchell 2) and "feather canyons" (3). The second stanza describes clouds and oppressive bearers of rain and snow. The refrain says, "I've looked at clouds from both sides now/From up and down, and still somehow/It's cloud illusions I recall/I really don't know clouds at all." (9 - 12). She says she's looked at clouds in different ways but she's only seen mirages. There is nothing real about the clouds she sees. They are merely illusions for which she creates meaning. Mitchell goes on to sing of the dual nature of love and of life. She again speaks of looking at things in different ways, and comes to the conclusion that she doesn't "know

life at all." Yet her experiences in love and in life have caused emotions, good and bad, within her. These emotions come from her interpretations of experience. By saying she doesn't really know life, she is saying that there is no real, fundamental truth behind her experiences. What she has seen as love is an illusion she created and felt, but there is no "Love", no Platonic form that precedes what she has felt. Her experiences of clouds, love, and life are her own creations.

Perhaps the most uplifting song with existential themes comes, not from popular or rock music, but from Hollywood. In *The Muppet Movie*, a children's movie that is as wise and touching as it is silly and fun, Kermit the Frog sings "Rainbow Connection." When Kermit sings of the Rainbow Connection, he is not speaking of the empirical phenomenon of a rainbow. He is speaking of the meaning behind it and the feelings it creates. He is speaking of the magic of a rainbow. He also illustrates this magic through the examples of wishing on a star, and hearing a mysterious "calling" to be something. When singing of wishing on a star, he admits that "somebody thought of that/And someone believed it." (*The Muppet Movie* 11 - 12). The idea that a wish on a star would be heard was created by people, and isn't inherent in the star or the act of wishing. People created the meaning of the act. While this meaning is transmitted from person to person and is not repeatedly conceived of on an individual basis, it is still meaning that was created by someone and that was not there *a priori*. Recognizing this fact is embracing the existential theme of human creation of meaning.

Conclusion

The themes outlined in this paper are only a generalized sample of an extremely broad school of thought. Existential philosophy is vast and complicated, and permeates every aspect of our culture. Its presence in the music of today and of the past few decades indicates its relevance. The ideas that we are alone in an indifferent universe, that existence is absurd, that we are free and responsible for our individual lives, and that we must create our own meaning, are inherent in a significant amount of introspective thought in today's culture.

It is easy to view the existential approach to life and thought as dark, dismal, and depressing. This paper has attempted to show the more positive, optimistic aspects of the philosophy as well as the gloomier ones. The major tenets illustrated here show the honesty, openness, relevance, and emotional qualities of the philosophy as a whole. It is up to the individual to consider its teachings and interpret them in his or her own way.

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She stands waist-deep in the salty gulf
That swells to neck-deep with every wave.
She jumps to keep her face free of
The salty-sweet swaying embrace

That jostles and shakes and pushes and rocks
Her racing burning terrified being.
And each gush smells of danger and dread
And each pound burns and each hit stings.

She loses herself when her feet lose the sand
But she finds no one when she hits the ground.
She's dizzy and helpless so she turns away
To walk and crawl and stumble down

To her knees on the beach, sturdy, but there
She feels nothing but lonely wind
And the damp tattered towel and the aching need
To be enveloped again

In twisting itchy bliss, she falls
Into the coldly welcoming arms of the sea.
She won't escape though she knows she could.
She shuts her mind and forgets she's free.

Then she cries out in terror and longing for
Sleepy peace she'll never feel
And she grasps the stinging water's love
And braces herself for another reel.

Megan McClary

Creeping, crippling cold covers his corpse.
I lost my toes a few blocks back.
He trudges and stumbles and fights the wind.
I don't know when I lost my hands.

A group of girls go giggling by.
Now where was I going again?
A familiar flushed face nods his way.
My elbows are gone—there go my legs.

Slow snow silently slides, surrounding him.
I don't remember ever having ears.
Branches bow to the frozen clouds.
Anyway, what's out here to hear?

Megan McClary